

I. Why Foreign Languages?

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A Columbia-based computer software company has offices in Canada, England, France, Germany, Spain, Norway, and Australia. Greenville, South Carolina, is home to a Japanese cultural center where the staff is multilingual and the clientele is international. A French sailboat company advertises for a mechanical engineer to fill a position in Marion, South Carolina. "French is a plus," the ad says. And German automaker BMW is operating an assembly plant in our state in Spartanburg County.

As we enter the new millennium, South Carolina's global economy is playing its part. Over five hundred businesses in the state have at least 50 percent foreign ownership, according to the South Carolina Department of Commerce. A total of twenty-seven foreign countries have financial interests here. Foreign-affiliated capital investments in South Carolina for 1998 alone amounted to a record \$2.8 billion and were responsible for the creation of 7,532 jobs. International companies employ about eighty-four thousand people in South Carolina.

"Foreign investment in South Carolina has grown dramatically in recent years," says a business report by KPMG Peat Marwick, an international accounting firm with an office in Greenville. "It is a significant and vital part of the state economy."

And these figures are only part of the story. They tell us nothing of the growing number of locally owned businesses entering foreign markets, the increasing numbers of foreign citizens moving to South Carolina, the importance of foreign travelers to the state's tourism industry, or the expanding international job opportunities for our young people outside of the State.

It is time for education in South Carolina to recognize and respond to these changing economic and social realities. It is the responsibility of the State's educational system to prepare students to compete in an increasingly international job market and to live in an increasingly diverse world.

Top investing countries

France led all international activity in 1995 with investments of \$618.5 million and 1,954 new jobs. German firms were next at \$470 million, with 1,544 new jobs. Japan invested \$220 million, creating 817 jobs.

International Companies in South Carolina.

To be successful, South Carolinians must enter the new millennium with expanded cultural horizons and increased communication skills. A logical place to start in meeting this challenge is to increase foreign language instruction in our schools.

Economic and cultural reasons for studying foreign languages

The call for increased foreign language education in American public schools has been gaining momentum since the 1970s and has come from education, business, and government sources. Here are some examples:

- In 1975, the United States was one of thirty-five nations to sign the Helsinki Accords, a treaty calling for participating countries “to encourage the study of foreign languages and civilizations as an important means of expanding communication among peoples.”
- A 1979 report, *Strength through Wisdom, a Critique of U.S. Capability*, prepared by the President’s Commission on Foreign Language and International Studies, concluded: “Americans’ incompetence in foreign languages is nothing short of scandalous ...our lack of foreign language competence diminishes our capabilities in diplomacy, in foreign trade, and in citizen comprehension of the world in which we live and compete” (5–6).
- The National Commission on Excellence in Education in its 1983 report, *A Nation at Risk: The Imperative for Educational Reform*, called for foreign language education beginning in the elementary grades. “Study of a foreign language introduces students to non-English-speaking cultures, heightens awareness and comprehension of one’s native tongue, and serves the Nation’s needs in commerce, diplomacy, defense and education” (26).
- The Goals 2000: Educate America Act of 1994 states, “By the year 2000, all students will leave grades 4, 8, and 12 having demonstrated competency over challenging subject matter including English, mathematics, science, foreign languages, civics and government, economics, arts, history, and geography, and every school in America will ensure that all students learn to use their minds well, so they may be prepared for responsible citizenship, further learning, and productive employment in our Nation’s modern economy.”

A key called language

“Language is a key to opening minds and attitudes. To speak, read, write, and understand another language is the beginning of understanding other people.”

“If we believe we can effectively trade, provide political leadership, keep on top of scientific developments, and share the benefits of the cultural growth of the rest of the world in our island of English, we fool only ourselves.”

Paul Simon, *The Tongue-Tied American*, 49, 76.

A subtle indicator

“Keeping prices competitive may land U.S. businesses foreign contracts, but when prices are close, other much more subtle indicators come into play. Business people’s knowledge of the country and language they are dealing with can put them over the top. Also, cheap prices may give business people an initial contract abroad, but communications problems between the buyer and seller can wind up souring future business deals.”

Myriam Marquez, “Speak Their Language to Bridge Trade Barrier,” *State*, 12 January 1992.

- *Standards for Foreign Language Learning: Preparing for the 21st Century*, published in 1996, established “a new context that defines the central role of foreign language in the learning career of every student. . . . Standards have defined the agenda for the next decade—and beyond” (7).

Today the need for foreign language education is more urgent than ever. Dr. Jeffrey Arpan, president of the Academy of International Business and director of the internationally acclaimed International Business Programs at the University of South Carolina in Columbia, wrote in the spring 1992 issue of the *International Society for Business Education Newsletter*:

Education that is NOT international in context, example and experience is incomplete, irrelevant to today’s world and inexcusably myopic. It is even potentially dangerous. From pre-school through college school curricula should be internationally oriented and of world quality standard. . . .

More job opportunities exist globally than domestically hence there are more opportunities for persons with international education, experience, skills and mindsets. For example, business persons who are bilingual in Spanish and English have dozens of countries in which employment is possible and are able to transact business with people in even more countries who speak either English or Spanish. (1–2)

USC’s nationally ranked Master of International Business Studies (MIBS) program was the first graduate program in the country to respond to the growing demand for business leaders for managers who could live and work in the emerging global environment, speak at least one foreign language fluently, and understand the nuances of the culture in the country or region where that language is spoken.

The MIBS program requires all of its American students to become competent in a foreign language. The program develops this proficiency in the student by “weaving” language and cultural training throughout the curriculum, which includes two months of study at an overseas language institution.

Languages and math

“Some mathematics competencies do have a role to play in foreign language study. For example, it is not unreasonable to expect students to add, subtract, multiply, and divide in the foreign language and to learn the metric system. . . . Students need to practice these skills in order to count; give historical and birth dates; use telephone numbers; read train, plane, theater, movie, and TV schedules; tell time using the 24-hour system; make currency exchanges; describe height and weight and clothing sizes—in short, to learn how to make their way in the practical and necessary routines of daily living. Knowledge of these skills is an indispensable part of foreign language instruction. Foreign language study provides ample opportunities for students to become proficient at using the simple arithmetic of everyday life.”

Academic Preparation in Foreign Language, 100–101.

The need for a second language does not require that one leave the country or work for a multinational corporation. “There’s an advantage to being multilingual in the United States even if you’re not in international business,” says Dr. Arpan. As American society becomes more culturally diverse, so does the work force—and the plant manager or personnel manager who can communicate in more than one language has an advantage. Proficiency in a second language can also benefit people entering careers in science, law, tourism, advertising, and social services.

In today’s global economy, multinational corporations are establishing world-class standards throughout their operations, utilizing best practices wherever their particular businesses are located. According to Brian Ewing, former managing director of the MIBS program, scientists, engineers, and technicians who have foreign language skills have a distinct advantage when they have to communicate with colleagues from other parts of the world. English may be the language of international business, but the ability to converse in another language and to be aware of cultural differences are tremendous assets.

An International Education Task Force established in 1989 by Greenville Technical College surveyed Greenville-area businesses and discovered that 60 percent of the respondents had foreign employees, 85 percent had employees traveling abroad, and 95 percent entertained visitors from foreign countries. Not surprisingly, 80 percent of the respondents said they wanted Greenville Tech to increase its foreign language offerings. As a result, the school has expanded programs in Spanish, French, German, Russian, and Japanese.

Most of the State’s sixteen technical colleges, in fact, offer foreign language courses. “Foreign language in high school is not an entry requirement to a technical college,” according to Dr. Dianne Brandstadter, assistant associate director for instruction with the State Board for Technical and Comprehensive Education. “But we strongly recommend it for the students pursuing Associate of Arts and Associate of Science degrees.” The implication for our public schools is clear: foreign language study is not the exclusive domain of university-bound students anymore.

It is also clear that as South Carolina businesses become increasingly involved in global economics, South Carolinians have more opportunities to meet, work, socialize, and share neighborhoods with people from other countries. A survey of member businesses conducted in 1992 by the South Carolina Chamber of Commerce found that the ability to “appreciate and work well with men and women from diverse backgrounds” is considered a “high” or “very high” priority by the vast majority of respondents.

Here again, foreign language education can help. At all levels of study, students of a foreign language are given the means to understand and appreciate the customs and beliefs of the language’s native speakers. As Dr. Arpan explains, “You can’t learn Japanese without learning the culture.”

Effectively developed language skills and cultural awareness are complementary keys to success. Together they make good education, good community relations, good business, and good sense.

Academic reasons for studying foreign languages

Students gain essential academic benefits from foreign language study. Among these are communication skills, cultural knowledge, connections to other subject areas, comparisons to their own language and culture, and participation in multilingual communities at home and around the world.

The study of European languages, both modern and classical, enhances vocabulary building because so many English words are derived from those languages. Languages such as Japanese, Arabic, and Russian have the additional benefit of requiring students to develop the ability to interpret unfamiliar symbols. Students of foreign languages gain a greater understanding of grammatical structures and syntax and significantly increase their vocabularies.

In various research throughout the United States, foreign language study has also been found to be associated with improvements in students' creativity, self-concept, critical thinking abilities, memory, listening skills, and performances on standardized tests. Foreign language educators Helena Anderson Curtain and Carol Ann Pesola give examples of several such studies in their *Languages and Children, Making the Match: Foreign Language Instruction for an Early Start Grades K–8*.

Students also gain an increased appreciation for literature, art, and music as a result of exposure to foreign cultures. Mental flexibility is enhanced by the reasoning, problem-solving and conceptualizing processes that are frequently used in learning a language.

These benefits hold true for the college-bound and noncollege-bound student alike. Even students considered to have poor basic skills gain advantages from foreign language study. According to Curtain and Pesola, "This may be an excellent time to shed the 'elitist' image that foreign languages have borne for most of this century in the United States. Evidence from the inner-city schools of Philadelphia, Milwaukee and Cincinnati, among others, supports the idea of including learners of all levels of ability and background in foreign language study. Students with poor skills may even have the most to gain from the opportunity to study languages" (265).

Devoting part of the school day to foreign language study helps students in their mastery of other subjects—either directly through the application of improved verbal and thinking skills or indirectly as the result of improved self-confidence.

Curricular cooperation

"Every area of the curriculum can be reinforced or enriched in the foreign language classroom, and subject content can be taught through the second language. This kind of integration can foster appreciation of other cultures and can add significant dimensions to the content being taught. With close cooperation between language and classroom teachers, the second language experience can contribute directly to the mastery of first language concepts in the curriculum."

Curtain and Pesola, *Languages and Children, Making the Match: Foreign Language Instruction for an Early Start Grades K–8*, 9.

According to the article “The Rationale for Elementary School Foreign Language Programs,” published in the *Iowa FLES Newsletter* (1989), “The foreign language segment need not pull time away from basic skills—it can be just one more diverse, enjoyable means of reinforcing those skills. A trained elementary foreign language instructor will develop a rapport with the classroom teacher, explore his or her curriculum, and find ways to enhance the instruction of basic concepts at that grade level. The classroom teacher benefits and the language is acquired and internalized, because it is necessary for communication of thoughts.”

Foreign language study is an educational necessity, along with English, math, science, social studies, physical education, and the arts. We must regard foreign languages as an integral part of any program of study.

Where we are and where we are going in foreign language education

Learning to communicate successfully in a foreign language in real-life situations requires time. Brain research indicates that readiness for foreign language learning begins at infancy and peaks at age ten. The current two years of high school foreign language study required for admission to state-supported colleges and universities are not nearly enough. Steps must be taken to ensure a long sequence of foreign language study.

In an effort to address this need, the Goals 2000: Educate America Act was signed into law by the president of the United States in 1994 and was supported by all fifty governors. This act calls for a “substantial” increase in “the percentage of students who are competent in more than one language” by the year 2000. In 1991, South Carolina’s Education Goals had already named foreign language study as one of the areas in which students are to be proficient by the millennium.

This positive trend must continue. The student who begins learning a foreign language in elementary school and continues studying it uninterrupted through high school has the best chance of becoming proficient in the language. As Curtain and Pesola explain in *Languages and Children, Making the Match: Foreign Language Instruction for an Early Start Grades K–8*, “One of the most important factors influencing the development of language proficiency is the amount of time spent in working with the language. When language learning begins earlier, it can go on longer and provide more practice and experience, leading ultimately to greater fluency and effectiveness” (3-4).

Fortunately, an encouraging trend is developing in the Palmetto State. Increasing numbers of elementary school students are beginning a continuous and sequential program of study in foreign languages. The South Carolina Foreign Languages in the Elementary School Network reports that, at the beginning of the 1998–99 school year, twenty-three of the eighty-six school districts were offering foreign language instruction in the elementary schools. Currently there are students who are enrolled in their ninth year of foreign language study. Partial immersion programs are developing; the benefit is that such programs emphasize connections with other subject areas.

A vision for the new millennium

Keeping in mind the economic, cultural, and academic benefits of learning a foreign language and the advantages of beginning study at an early age, this framework establishes and supports three basic premises of effective foreign language education:

- opportunities for foreign language education for every student,
- foreign language programs that begin in elementary school and continue uninterrupted through high school, and
- instruction in foreign languages that is standards-based.

Together these premises create the vision that will guide foreign language education. By building on these premises, South Carolina public schools can help prepare all of our students to deal successfully with the challenges and opportunities of living in a global community.

Why is it better for my child to learn a foreign language in elementary school?

“As with any subject, the more years a child can devote to learning a language, the more competent he or she will become.”

Why, How, and When Should My Child Learn a Second Language?
(ERIC Parent Brochure).

Why study a foreign language at an early age?

“The painful truth is that learning to speak, read, write, and think in another language takes a long time, and age and attitude have an effect on one's ability to become proficient in another language.”

Standards for Foreign Language Learning, 98.